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Donald Trump Is Weak. And Powerful. Now What?

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Everyone knows by now how many Trump candidates lost this year, especially the higher-profile, more hard-core ones who claimed the 2020 election was stolen. Kari Lake lost in Arizona. Doug Mastriano lost in Pennsylvania. Most of the notable pro-Trump secretary of state candidates lost. The Senate candidates, too. The Democrats even added on in Georgia on Tuesday, with the same, central animating force behind each development: that Donald Trump forced his party to run a candidate, Herschel Walker, who lost, weakening Mr. Trump and the party — a mutual descent.

What everyone does not know by now is what to do with Mr. Trump's third candidacy for president. What is this campaign? He's a candidate without opponents, who has made less frequent public appearances since his announcement than he did before, whose party's other notable members seem to want to move on but often still don't really say so publicly. The 2022 incarnation of Mr. Trump is like some kind of trap: He keeps losing and forcing others to go with him, in part because of his and their nature and in part because without him, Republicans might not quite be able to win, either.

Looming over every aspect of Mr. Trump's current campaign is the simple question: Will this be like before? That has a technical, outcome-driven dimension (will he win and become president?) and a more cultural, psychological one (will he dominate American life, and will each day's news turn on the actions and emotions of one person cascading through society?). Politics is about a lot more than just the outcomes of elections; a long time separates us from the 2024 election, and each day has the potential to influence the ones after. Something can be weak and a considerable force in politics or culture at the same time; someone can be losing and influential at the same time. These things are compatible.

The country spent nearly two years hearing about voting machine conspiracies and the possibility of subversion in future elections. Voters rejected all that in many cases. What did the last two years mean for Mr. Trump and these candidates? For all of us? Nobody got anything of real value out of conspiracy theories and Trump recriminations. Not the Republicans, certainly, and that's been the tenor of much post-election coverage and conversation — the way Mr. Trump's choices produced certain outcomes that hurt the Republican Party.

"The people that were on the crazy side, they've kind of been sent off to the frontier," Tony Evers, Wisconsin's Democratic governor, told Semafor this week. "If you're denying the last election or any election, I think that balloon has been popped." Even so, it's no great gift to the country as a whole that candidates ran for two years on suspicion about normal election practices or advancing conspiracy theories, which people heard and internalized — a more intangible result with effects harder to measure.

Since Mr. Trump's announcement for president, as you have also heard by now, he's repeatedly demanded that the 2020 election be redone, even straight up saying that there could be a "termination" of the Constitution. Two nights before Thanksgiving, he ate dinner with a white supremacist and Kanye West, who can't stop saying antisemitic things. These events can also be viewed through this dual dynamic of weakness and influence. In the most basic horse race political sense, Mr. Trump's actions almost certainly hurt him; more Republicans have criticized him, and we have multiple election cycles of results suggesting that people reject his choices. This weakens him. But he still has influence, and through this one dinner, for instance, many, many people heard about an extreme racist they probably never heard about before.

In 2022, even when Mr. Trump seems to be fading politically, nobody has conclusively resolved the question of how to deal with him — when to step in and when to ignore, how to measure one action against another. The central issue flows from an understanding that most people in this country seem to share, however they feel about him: Mr. Trump will not be stopped from endlessly wanting things. And he will not confine himself to the ways in which a president or public person is supposed to behave, in pursuit of this endless array of wants and needs.

Faced with this uncontrollability, people fall into complex emotional dynamics of how to react to Mr. Trump — to care or not care, how to demonstrate caring, to ignore him or this or that, to never ignore it, how far to go, when to walk away, when to stay, when someone else's silence becomes unacceptable. How is a person supposed to be? What can a single person do? What are our duties and obligations? These questions animate centuries of literature and philosophy, but Mr. Trump's chemical mix of emotion and power turns them into an hourly concern. He will not change; you can. This is an exhausting texture of American life in this era, even now.

It's almost hard to remember what the first campaign was like, though it, too, started with a weak hand. Mr. Trump defeated a splintered field with, initially, mere pluralities of votes. And you were constantly finding out how weak American institutions were: the thinness of political belief among Republican politicians, the inability of different institutions to do anything about Mr. Trump's candidacy, the true incentives of cable news, how game people were to go along with, for instance, an attack on Mexicans or Gold Star parents. Practically overnight, Republican and conservative groups went from opposing Mr. Trump to caving in to the reality of his candidacy to emphatically supporting him. This general dynamic repeated again and again for years.

Seven years in, one of the more disorienting aspects of the Trump era is the way there's never any sense of resolution. The entire population hangs in a kind of eternal suspense, without past or future. Since the week of Jan. 6, 2021, without Mr. Trump's ceaseless presence on the major social platforms, things have been somewhat different. But who knows where he goes from here? He might return to Twitter. He might really be fading. He might lose to Ron DeSantis, Florida's governor. He might not accept a loss to anyone, at any point. He might be president again. Could we really revert to the full chaotic, exhausting, late-2010s immersion in Mr. Trump's emotions?

The need to know how it ends with Mr. Trump, what will happen next and how people respond to him, can obscure the current situation. And over the past year, it's become clearer how power and weakness and influence can exist in one space and in one person. In this dark environment, Mr. Trump can lose an election and still change American life indefinitely.

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